

Peacekeeping



U.S. Navy (Jim Hampshire)

in West Africa

By DAVID G. LEATHERWOOD

Instability in West Africa presents U.S. decisionmakers with a conundrum. The domestic imperative to avoid entangling new commitments abroad is tempered by the CNN effect—the need to do something to alleviate the plight of those ravaged by armed conflict, disease, famine, and

natural disasters. Responding to these contradictory pressures, successive administrations have largely relied on Africans to maintain peace and security on their continent. While consistent with Chapter VIII of the United Nations charter, this approach has practical limitations.

A look at support for Nigerian military intervention in West Africa, using events in Liberia and Sierra Leone as case studies, reveals more cause for caution than optimism. Though demographics and globalization have both

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Boarding C-5 in
Ghana, Focus Relief.

78th Communications Squadron (Pamela J. Farin)

contributed to a contagious anarchy, at its heart regional instability is not caused by these phenomena, nor is it spontaneous. State sponsorship of insurrection from neighboring states is at the root, and inappropriate international responses to this combination of invasion and rebellion have only compounded the problem.

Ensuring the success of Nigeria's fledgling democracy has become a rationale for significant increases in U.S.

military aid. In the rush to assist Abuja, policymakers frequently cite the Nigerian military's past accomplishments in ensuring regional stability. Its record in this regard, however, is suspect. Support for ongoing operations in West Africa is misguided. Pouring funds, equipment, and training into Nigeria profits segments of that country's military, as well as the U.S. contractors involved. But American largess does not contribute to regional conflict resolution and may indeed retard it.

Troubled Corner of the World

The latest chapter in Liberia's sad history can be traced to an armed invasion led by Charles Taylor. In December 1989, Taylor, who had fled to the United States to escape corruption charges, returned to his native Liberia leading a rebel band of 160. There they confronted the dictatorial regime of Samuel Doe, a former noncommissioned officer who had come to power through a coup in 1980. Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)

swelled to 6,000 within months. With significant material support from the government of Burkina Faso, the front gained control of all the major Liberian towns outside of Monrovia by late 1990. Fighting was fierce in the first year; an estimated 200,000 died while 600,000 sought refuge in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire.

Events in Liberia concerned Nigerian officials for several reasons. The beleaguered Doe was an ally of Nigerian military dictator Major General Ibrahim Babangida. Taylor, with reputed ties to Libya, also represented a threat to stability beyond Liberia's borders. More immediately, three thousand Nigerian citizens residing in Liberia had been rounded up by NPFL and moved to the interior as hostages. The safety of the Nigerian embassy in Monrovia became increasingly precarious as well.

At Babangida's suggestion, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) dispatched troops to



DOD (Helene C. Shikell)

Liberia in August 1990 to contain the civil war. Its multinational military entity was termed the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), although there was no ceasefire in effect at the time of its dispatch. The force initially consisted of Gambian, Ghanaian, Guinean, Nigerian, and Sierra

Nigerian-dominated intervention was perceived as a partisan effort

Leonean troops organized in national contingents. The commander was Ghanaian General Arnold Quainoo, but the overwhelming majority of the troops and key leaders were Nigerian.

The Nigerian-dominated intervention was perceived by most Liberians as a partisan effort against Taylor. NPFL forces that had encircled Monrovia immediately engaged ECOMOG troops on the edge of town. When Doe was murdered shortly after the arrival of ECOMOG, Quainoo was removed and replaced by a Nigerian general. The command remained in Nigerian hands throughout the conflict.

ECOMOG held Monrovia from 1990 to 1992 but made little progress in expanding its area of control. Thirteen ceasefires between warring factions were negotiated in the following years, apparently motivated more by the warring

parties' tactical considerations than good faith. As these agreements invariably broke down, ECOMOG vacillated between agendas favoring various factions, and its mission alternated between peacekeeping and peace enforcement. An apparent agreement between Taylor and Babangida cleared the way for Liberian elections and a peace agreement that finally held in 1997.

Episodes of individual valor in the Nigerian contingent within ECOMOG were marred by widespread corruption. The priority for many Nigerian troops, who sometimes went months without pay, was personal profit. Looting was common. Corruption became institutionalized and ever more efficient as the group's presence in Liberia dragged on over seven years. Illicit economic endeavors in Liberia centered on rubber, timber, U.N. humanitarian aid, drugs, and diamonds. Criminal profits made sustaining deployment abroad an end unto itself.

Nigerian involvement in the group was unpopular domestically. While the public generally accepted their government's argument that Libyan-sponsored instability spreading from Burkina Faso had to be contained, many perceived the cost as excessive. The national windfall from oil revenues during the Persian Gulf War was consumed by the deployment. As Nigeria's economy

faced harder times, deployments abroad became increasingly controversial. National records put the total spent on ECOMOG by past military governments at \$8 billion.

Ultimately, the Nigerian-led intervention in Liberia merely delayed a transfer of power from one corrupt despot to another. It neither saved Doe nor stopped Taylor. The arrival of the Nigerians in August 1990 very likely saved residents of Monrovia from starvation, but it also kept the factions who fought Taylor fed and armed for years. By prolonging the period in which Liberia was divided without a single sovereign, ECOMOG did little nationbuilding.

Nigeria

Defense Budget. \$340 million for 2000; the gross domestic product in 2000 was \$53 billion (\$1,359 per capita).

Manpower. With a population of 113,007,000, Nigeria has a total of 16,749,000 men between 18 and 32 years of age. Active military strength is 78,500.

Armed Forces. Nigeria has an army of 62,000 with 200 main battle tanks; a navy of 7,000 sailors with one frigate and eight patrol and coastal craft; and an air force with 9,500 personnel and 86 combat aircraft and 10 armed helicopters.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2001).

Diamonds Are Forever

The conflict in Liberia is inexorably linked with the strife in Sierra Leone. In March 1991, NPFL forces crossed into the country from Liberia. Aimed at capturing the diamond mining areas, the offensive was led by former Sierra Leonean Corporal Foday Sankoh. A close friend of Taylor, Sankoh had previously attended training with him in Libya and worked with him in support of Blaise Campaore's coup in Burkina Faso. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) Sankoh founded in Sierra Leone was largely an offshoot of NPFL.

A year after the RUF invasion, the government fell to a military coup led by 28-year-old army Captain Valentine Strasser in April 1992. In 1993, Strasser's National Provisional Ruling Council, with the assistance of \$18 million in U.S. military aid, was able to regain the diamond mines in the south and east previously lost to the rebels. These gains were short lived, however. Sierra Leonean soldiers themselves began to engage in illegal mining, exporting the diamonds through Liberia as RUF rebels had. Government revenues remained low and rebel activity picked up. Guinea, countering RUF incursions into its diamond-mining regions, conducted cross-border raids on

Nigerian soldiers conducting live fire drill.



U.S. Navy (Jim Hampshire)

the insurgents in Sierra Leone. Further confusing the situation was the emergence of the *Sobel* phenomenon, as more and more government troops became soldiers by day and rebels by night. By 1995 the insurgents had taken back the Sierra Leone diamond mines, consolidated control of the northern half of the country, and threatened Freetown.

Lacking a credible military force, the Strasser junta hired mercenaries to counter RUF. In exchange for a promise of future mining revenues, Executive Outcomes, based in South Africa, deployed men to Sierra Leone in May 1995. Using two contracted MI-17 gunships and a Sierra Leonean MI-24 helicopter, mercenaries in Sierra Leonean uniforms recaptured all the diamond-mining centers within nine months. Their military prowess did not save Strasser. He was ousted in a military coup led by defense minister Brigadier General Julius Mada Bio in January 1996. Bio arranged for elections as a precursor to a return to civilian rule and negotiated a ceasefire with RUF.

Ahmad Tejan Kabbah emerged from the March 1996 elections as the President of Sierra Leone. On taking office, he terminated the relationship with Executive Outcomes, signed a bilateral defense pact with Nigeria, and negotiated a peace agreement with

RUF. The November 1996 agreement, known as the Abidjan Peace Accord, required the rebels to disarm, demobilize, and transform into a political party. The accord was overtaken by

Nigeria's primary interest in Sierra Leone was diamonds

events before it could be implemented. Major Johnny Paul Koroma of the Sierra Leone army and twenty confederates stormed a Freetown prison on May 25, 1997, released 600 prisoners, and overthrew the elected government. Through the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), Koroma and his followers then declared themselves the new rulers and invited RUF to join them. The rebels marched into an already anarchic Freetown and Kabbah fled to Guinea. From his exile in Conakry, he requested Nigerian intervention under the terms of their bilateral pact. Just as scheduled elections in Liberia heralded the imminent end of one prolonged Nigerian military operation abroad, another beckoned.

ECOMOG headquarters in Monrovia sluggishly planned and executed the overall Nigerian military response to the Sierra Leone coup. Force commander Lieutenant General Victor

Malu was away in Nigeria at the time of the coup. Once back, he took the lead in a dual track strategy of negotiations with AFRC and simultaneous preparing for a military solution. The Nigerians and AFRC/RUF agreed to restore democratic government to Sierra Leone, but the accord was never implemented. In February 1998, almost a year after the coup, ECOMOG troops from Nigeria took Freetown from AFRC/RUF.

Nigeria's primary interest in Sierra Leone was diamonds. Indeed, diamonds are at the heart of the current conflicts in West Africa. The bulk of RUF diamond exports, for example, valued at \$75 million annually, continue to leave Sierra Leone through Liberia. The complicity of the Liberian government has been documented by the United Nations.

The mounting cost of the operation in Sierra Leone and unfavorable military conditions on the ground caused Nigeria to threaten to pull its troops out despite the prospect of mineral wealth. Kabbah then signed the Lome Accords with Sankoh on July 7, 1999, under pressure from multiple foreign benefactors. This peace agreement called for the U.N. Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), which had evacuated Freetown in December 1998, to return to monitor implementation.

Wave the Blue Flag

The U.N. Security Council authorized the expansion of UNOMSIL to 210 military observers in August 1999. The Nigerian military, presented with an opportunity to legitimize their efforts with a U.N. imprimatur and also receive funding, reconsidered its decision to withdraw. Thus Nigerians formed a large part of the contingent when a force of 6,000 U.N. Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) peacekeepers was authorized by Resolution 1270 in October 1999.

In early May 2000, RUF kidnapped hundreds of Zambian and Kenyan U.N. personnel who had deployed to monitor compliance. The British decided to intervene as RUF rebels massed 85 kilometers north of Freetown at Rogberi Junction. With little faith in the Nigerians or U.N. forces, Britain sent its own

Evacuees assembling
in Freetown, Assured
Response.



U.S. Air Force (Richard M. Heleman)

soldiers. The air force flew in 400 troops to Freetown under a Commonwealth mandate. Some 800 marines followed aboard *HMS Ocean*, a new amphibious assault carrier. Quick action, to include helicopter assaults on advancing rebels, saved the capital from falling again.

Contrasting with the British performance in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL got off to a rough start. Hampered by internal bickering and a fluctuating situation on the ground, the United Nations was quickly caught in the ECOMOG trap of alternating between peacekeeping and peace enforcement. The UNAMSIL mandate was extended and expanded in August 2000, authorizing offensive action.

Reports reached the United Nations in September on illegal diamond trading between senior Nigerian military officers and RUF. Rather than investigating the allegations made by the impolitic UNAMSIL commander, the U.N. removed him. India and Jordan, the two most capable militaries within the mission, then announced that they would withdraw their forces. Another tenuous ceasefire was signed in November 2000. Few suspected any peace would follow.

Meanwhile, an armed conflict in Guinea further illustrated the transnational nature of West African proxy insurgencies. Events there had a familiar

ring—and what is remarkable about the methods employed to contend with them is how little schemes varied from past ineffective responses to instability. Troops on U.N. peacekeeping missions in recent years, restricted to acting in self defense, have frequently confused their mandate of impartiality with neutrality. The result has often been a force prone to appease aggressors and unsuited to oversee true disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants. Equally damning, the duration of deployments has proven difficult to curtail. This inertia takes on even greater immediacy in civil wars, where prolonging the temporary division of states undermines domestic and international stability.

On the Sidelines

American military actions at the outset of the West African crises were restricted to noncombatant evacuation managed by U.S. European Command (EUCOM). Operation Sharp Edge removed American nationals from Liberia between April 1990 and January 1991. A similar mission, put together so hastily it was not named, performed evacuations from Sierra Leone from April 29 to May 4.

As U.S. decisionmakers resolved to stay out of conflicts in the region, they

rushed to find surrogates. Senegal agreed to deploy troops to Liberia as part of ECOMOG in return for \$15 million in aid. Another \$19 million was provided to Kenya and Tanzania. Babangida's decision to annul the Nigerian elections was the chief hurdle U.S. policymakers had in helping West Africans contain Charles Taylor. The United States joined other Western nations in imposing sanctions against Nigeria. U.S. sanctions included a ban on military services and the sale and repair of equipment, as well as restrictions on visas for Nigerian government officials. The U.S. military ability to track and influence regional events declined as a result of the sanctions. Washington decided not to replace its defense attaché, who was completing his tour of duty, leaving an Air Force major as the senior defense officer in the attaché's office. Meanwhile, in the downsized embassy in Monrovia, a single Army lieutenant colonel was responsible for covering both Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In late 1994 and early 1995, Peter Chaveas, a senior Foreign Service Officer with extensive experience in Nigeria, moved on from his position as Director of the West Africa Office. Dane Smith, who replaced him at the State Department Bureau of African Affairs, was stretched thin by his additional duties as special envoy for Liberia. Political appointee Susan Rice took over the African Affairs Office at the National Security Council (NSC). The net effect of these changes was to consolidate NSC leadership on West African matters in Washington.

Significant changes were also occurring at EUCOM. General James Jamerson, USAF, took over as Deputy Commander in Chief in July 1995. The Commander in Chief, General George Joulwan, USA, immediately used him to initiate a program of proactive engagement. Nigeria's pariah status and instability in Liberia, however, resulted in minimal command interaction with those states.

U.S. assistance to ECOMOG now took discrete forms. The U.S. Government worked through contractors to provide Nigerians in Liberia with trucks, radios, and helicopters in 1996 and 1997. Behind the scenes cooperation

with Nigeria's dictatorship, while clearly not in the spirit of sanctions, was nevertheless welcomed by many in Congress.

A New Era—Perhaps

The death of military dictator General Sani Abacha in 1998 had a profound impact on the entire spectrum of U.S. relations with Nigeria. When both Abacha and his prominent civilian opponent, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, died of heart attacks in the summer of 1998, that curious coincidence set the stage for a return to democracy. General Abdulsalam Abubakar oversaw a transitional government, undertaking dramatic political reforms and scheduling an election that took place within a year of Abacha's death. Retired General Olusegun Obasanjo then took the reins of an elected government in May 1999. He initiated sweeping changes, ousting many senior officers in the course of consolidating power and reforming the military, retiring 17 generals, and then removing the chiefs of all three military services.

From 1999 to the present, U.S. foreign policy has focused on Nigeria as the region's key state. The idea be-

the death of dictator Sani Abacha had a profound impact on U.S. relations with Nigeria

hind this strategy is that limited foreign assistance is best spent on a state that is aware of its potential to exercise regional hegemony and willing and assertive enough to do it. This anchor state strategy, which gained momentum under Bill Clinton, has been adopted by the Bush administration.

Thomas Pickering, the Under Secretary of State and an ambassador to Nigeria in the early 1980s, flew to Abuja to discuss training for Nigerian troops in July 2000. Operation Focus Relief initially involved 3^d Special Forces Group providing 10 weeks of training to seven battalions—one Ghanaian, five Nigerian, and one Senegalese. Nigerians welcomed the proffered equipment but bristled at training. Citing their greater combat experience, they saw little to gain from U.S. instruction.

Evacuating civilians to
USS Kearsarge, Sierra
Leone, 1997.



USS Kearsarge (Aaron Kulik)

The military transformation training promised to the Nigerians has also proven a source of friction. It consists of a three-part process conducted by an American contractor, Military Professional Resources Incorporated, intended to reprofessionalize the Nigerian Ministry of Defense. Phase one, completed in 1999 at a cost to the U.S. Agency for International Development of \$1 million, entailed an assessment of necessary actions. Phase two, at a combined cost to the United States and Nigeria of \$7 million, was initiated in late 2000. As the process drags on, the military is showing irritation with perceived U.S. insensitivity to Nigeria's national sovereignty. The honeymoon is apparently over.

Sierra Leone remains one issue of contention. The challenge facing the international community is how to stop the violence without perpetuating that nation's partition. The United States has opted to treat conflict resolution in Sierra Leone primarily as an ancillary aspect of its détente with Nigeria. The fate of Nigeria, with Sub-Saharan Africa's largest population and its only megacity, is enormously important. Its embryonic democracy must be nurtured in every way, to include the sort of military engagement the United States has undertaken. One

should distinguish, however, between what is good for Nigeria and what is good for smaller countries in West Africa. Regional hegemony by nature retard the sovereignty of weaker states in their areas of influence. Nigeria, with its endemic corruption and other vestiges of its recent past, is not yet capable of instilling lasting stability in other countries.

Whatever the approach to conflict resolution in West Africa, it must encompass all of the affected states to succeed. It must also better coordinate the use of statecraft and military force, a complicated endeavor given the multiplicity of actors and interests. A decade of Nigerian intervention has made this much clear: peacekeeping alone will not induce stability. **JFQ**